

Musical Ancestries: Jewish Music and Culture Script

MUSICAL ANCESTRIES™ – JEWISH MUSIC AND CULTURE AROUND THE WORLD

Narrator: The class was buzzing with excitement! They'd just learned they were going to be part of something brand new! When Cantor Ruth entered the room, they respectfully stood up.

Students: ***Shalom***, Cantor Ruth.

C. Ruth: Shalom and thank you, students. Please be seated. I am so happy to join you today, and I have some big news from **Rabbi** David. But first, I have a question. Can anyone tell me what '***Tikkun Olam***' means?

Narrator: Sarah raised her hand.

Sarah: Cantor, I think it means, '**Repair of the World**'.

C. Ruth: Excellent, Sarah. Yes. And this concept is something that we Jews hold as a guiding principal for our lives, as you all approach your coming-of-age birthdays, becoming ***B'nai Mitzvah***. With that in mind, what are your thoughts on how we can put '***Tikkun Olam***' into practice? How can we even begin to repair this world as individuals?

Narrator: There was a thoughtful pause...

Sam: Maybe by learning more about others and becoming friends with them?

C. Ruth: Yes, Sam...exactly! And do you know one way we can do that? Through the universal language of music! Today we're learning

about Jewish music, how it has spread all over the entire world, and interacted with every style of music. See this new big-screen? Rabbi David asked the congregation to purchase it *just for you* so we'd be able to explore that entire world of Jewish music right here in this classroom! Let's get to it!

Our first video is of St. Louisan *Rick Recht* at *Temple Adat Shalom*, where he's leading the student choir in the Hebrew song '*Hinei Ma Tov*'. The Hebrew words mean: '*How good and pleasant it is for brothers & sisters to sit together*'.

Narrator: By the second chorus, the whole class was singing and moving to the music. Cantor Ruth laughed.

C. Ruth: You liked that one, hmm? The reason I started with that was because of the message of togetherness. Because it's only together that we can repair the world. OK – another question. **What does Jewish music sound like?**

Narrator: The students ventured guesses:

Sarah: Minor keys?

Zack: Yiddish songs?

Sam: Klezmer?

Shayna: Cantors?

All: *laughter*

C. Ruth: Yes – all that and more! It's pretty hard to define, isn't it? And that's because Jews are all over the world...in all cultures, in all walks of life, in any kind of profession you can think of, and involved in every

style of music. So in our class, even though we'll be learning about important traditions in Jewish music, we'll also examine diversity in music.

Sam, you said the first step toward '*Tikkun Olam*' was to learn more about others and become friends with them, yes? You're so right! But I think there may be one more step hidden in there. When we *learn* more about others, we can then *choose* to *accept* them for who they are... and then become friends. There's the key. Even though we all have differences, by *choosing to accept* those differences, we move from *judging* each other to *learning from* each other. By accepting and honoring others, we build understanding... and that's how we begin to repair the world. Make sense?

Narrator: The class all smiled and nodded. Cantor Ruth continued:

C. Ruth: So, let's look at some differences in music. We all just enjoyed '*Hinei Ma Tov*' with Rick Recht and his friends. Now, let's hear a rendition of the same text (Psalm 133), but this time with a different tune and style. This is Harry Belafonte, whose parents were both Jamaican. His Jewish heritage came from his Dutch grandfather, who had **Sephardic** origins. Born in New York, Harry lived in Jamaica for several years, and then returned to New York. He was a big star who made *Calypso* enormously popular in the 1950s. He's been celebrated as a successful recording artist, actor, producer, and activist. Here he is, singing '*Hinei ma Tov umanaim*'.

Narrator: Cantor Ruth gave her class a long look...

C. Ruth: Tell me – was the second example better or worse than the first one?

Shayna: No, not really. Just different.

C. Ruth: Excellent answer, Shayna! Let's talk about some of the differences between the two examples.

Sam: Belafonte's was slower and more serious.

Sarah: I'd say it seemed more personal to him, but the kids were singing just to have a good time.

Zack: Belafonte started out like it was really religious.

C. Ruth: Super observations! So, you see, you can listen closely and learn a lot, without making it a "contest" between the two styles. What a great class! You've already learned that very important step toward '**Tikkun Olam**'... choosing to accept differences.

C. Ruth: Zack, you just mentioned **religious music**...how is that different from **secular music**?

Zack: Oh, that's easy! You have fun with secular music!

All: *laughter*

C. Ruth: Maybe so – but what if it's a great big joyous celebration of the congregation? Isn't that fun, too? Or, at least, enjoyable?

Shayna: I know! Religious music is *intended to worship God*, where secular music isn't.

C. Ruth: And also realize that some music can be a blend of both religious and secular. Let's go back in history to our **Middle Eastern** roots for a minute, and dig a little deeper into the source of Jewish music. It's **modal**, which, to *our* ears, often sounds minor. (Somebody said minor, yes?) In the Middle Eastern tradition, harmony wasn't emphasized much, but the **melodic line** was very important. It had

intricate melodies, ornamentation, and even used **quarter-step tones**, which sound like they're out-of-tune to us. I'm speaking about Middle Eastern music in general, not just Jewish music.

In **religious music**, the idea was (and is) to connect more fully with God. So religious music in synagogues, churches, and mosques **helped people to come together as communities, worshipping** according to their own beliefs. Religious music is often **reflective**, allowing people to look inward for their relationship with God. In Jewish tradition, we have **Biblical cantillation**, a special style of chanting the words of Scripture, which brings out even deeper meaning.

Narrator: Cantor Ruth continued...

C. Ruth: There were also times of great **celebration in the various places of worship**. For instance, in a synagogue, one religious holiday of celebration is **Rosh Hashanah**, the New Year, when the **shofar** (the ram's horn) is sounded! Weddings are also celebrations, as are **coming-of-age celebrations!** What does *that* mean to *you*, class?

Zack: It's the time when we each become accountable for our own actions, and sort of become...well...grown-ups.

C. Ruth: Exactly, Zack. You then become a **Bar Mitzvah**, or a **Bat Mitzvah** – or, in the plural, **B'nai Mitzvah!** Weddings and B'nai Mitzvah are huge celebrations, so that music could be considered a **mix of religious and secular**.

The third type of music is **secular** – strictly for **art or entertainment**. It can be instrumental or vocal, and includes classical, popular, theatrical, folk songs, and dances. Here's a group of young people from Israel dancing to '*Lo Ahati Dai*' – '*I have not yet loved enough.*'

Let's move our chairs and dance with them – we all know the circle dance!

Narrator: The class loved it! Smiling, Cantor Ruth settled them down a little.

C. Ruth: OK, back to our lesson. Jewish Music can be described as having **three distinct streams, or styles**. It seemed to me that a good way to hear their differences might be to play a song in each style. We'll start with the **Ashkenazi, or the European stream, sometimes called 'Western'**. This music **originated in Eastern and Central Europe**, and then spread west to the **rest of Europe and the Americas**. (It also includes **Klezmer**, but we'll get to that in a little while.) Here we have the song *L'cha Dodi* in the **Ashkenazic** interpretation.

The **second** stream of Jewish Music is the **Sephardi, which refers to Mediterranean cultural sources**. Those would include **Spain, Portugal, North Africa, Greece, and Turkey**. You'll hear some intricate rhythms and unusual instruments in the accompaniment.

The **third** stream is the **Mizrahi** – literally, **Eastern**. It's the music of Jewish people who lived for centuries in the middle of **Arabic cultures**. This one's from Morocco, and you'll easily hear the Eastern influences in the instruments and the ornate line for the singer.

C. Ruth: Well, class, what do you think?

Jacob: WOW! That was really neat to hear how different they all were!

All: *quietly agree*

C. Ruth: And what's even *more* intriguing is that there are *many* more examples of different styles – literally from all around the world. Who knows the word '**diaspora**'?

Sarah: I've heard it, but I'm not really sure about its *exact* meaning.

C. Ruth: Actually, that great big word only means: **any people living away from their original homeland**. So when we say '**Jewish diaspora**', it means **Jews living anywhere else in the world, other than in Israel**. And here's an interesting point. Because of the expansion of the diaspora and the return of so many Jews to their homeland, **Israel itself now represents more cultures than any other nation!** You'll also find it's absolutely fascinating to trace your *own* family's roots, and learn how and why you and your family wound up where you are now!

Narrator: The class buzzed about this for a minute, until Cantor Ruth said,

C. Ruth: Let's go back to the **Ashkenazi** Jews for a minute. (Which ones are the **Ashkenazim** again?)

All: The ones who lived in Eastern and Central Europe.

C. Ruth: Right! You've all been listening – thank you! The style of music that influenced them was from Eastern Europe, and in the 9th Century, they began settling near the **Rhine River**. They're the ancestors of much of Western **Jewry**. They spoke **Hebrew**, the **tongue of the Bible**, but around the 10th century, the Hebrew blended with German, Slavic and some other languages to create **Yiddish**. By the way, a similar thing happened with the **Sephardic** Jews. When they lived in Spain, their Hebrew blended with Spanish and other languages to create **Ladino**. When they left Spain, the language went with them.

Narrator: Cantor Ruth continued...

C. Ruth: The **Ashkenazi** Jews also developed their own unique music called **Klezmer**. Formed from the Hebrew words 'klei' and 'zemer',

‘Klezmer’ literally means ‘instruments of song’. The term can refer to the style, or to the musicians themselves. Often, Klezmer pieces start slowly, then ramp up towards the end, leaving everyone energized and enjoying life! This is a Klezmer group called *Klezundheit!* – playing on a live radio show at the Missouri Botanical Gardens in St. Louis! Ready for some fun?

Narrator: The students loved the Klezmer music, were jazzed from its infectious good humor...but then Cantor Ruth became very serious.

C. Ruth: My young friends, when we study history, we sometimes find tragic chapters, where people lose their sense of right and wrong completely... even lose their humanity. Over the centuries, in many ways and in many places, there has been a type of hatred known as **anti-Semitism** – hatred of the Jews. Hatred grows when we don’t take time to get to know one another. So we make assumptions, and then believe those assumptions to be fact, which makes our directive of **‘Tikkun Olam’** all the more important. I’m sure you know that during **World War II**, *all* Jews were touched by unspeakable acts of brutality by the **Nazis**. Anti-Semitism had been festering in Europe for decades – since long before **World War I** – and it erupted horrifically during **World War II**.

Six million Jews perished during that terrible nightmare, but there were also those who lived! Untold acts of kindness were performed by **‘Righteous People’** who were not Jewish, but did whatever they possibly could to help the Jews, even risking their own lives. Deeply inspiring stories came out of that time of horror. Some of the more remarkable ones are about Jewish artists and musicians who continued to create, bringing *beauty* to a shattered world that could barely recognize it. That beauty is what art and music are all about... healing – or repairing – the world. **“Tikkun Olam”** – the human spirit triumphantly creating beauty in the darkest heart of evil.

So class, once again we return to *'Tikkun Olam'* and the **diaspora** – Jewish music in all corners of the world. Because *religious* music was so closely tied to the traditions and rituals of faith, so in some places it didn't change too much at all. However, as **Jewry** immersed into other cultures, the local secular music was influenced by the Jewish music, and vice-versa. Here's a **Sephardic ballad from Spain** telling of a wicked queen. The text is truly ancient, but the melody is from a much later time – around 1500 to 1600 CE.

C. Ruth: Now let's take a quick listen to a few other Jews in the **diaspora**... such as **Turkey**. This is the renowned Cantor, Isaac Algazi singing the prayer, *'Avinu malkenu'*, accompanied by oud, an old stringed instrument.

C. Ruth: This example shows you influences you would hear in **Nigeria**. These are the **Igbo Jews** in worship....

C. Ruth: Next, we visit the Jewish people of **Uganda** as they sing, "We Are Happy"

C. Ruth: Did you ever think that there were so many styles and voices in Jewish music? These are all amazingly diverse, aren't they? Here's another voice – a *popular Israeli singer*, Zohar Argov. He was so distinctive that more than 30 years after his death, he's still known as "The King Of Mizrahi Music".

Narrator: The students were fascinated by the different voices and sounds from so many lands. Cantor Ruth continued:

C. Ruth: Some of this music is many centuries old, and some quite recent. But it's important to realize the incredible diversity in our music as it developed throughout the **diaspora**. Just for fun, since everyone in this class studies music, let's name some classical composers who were Jewish. Anyone come to mind?

Shayna: Yes! Felix Mendelssohn!

Sam: Don't forget his sister, Fanny!

Sarah: How about Paul Dukas – *'The Sorcerer's Apprentice'*?

Zack: Gustav Mahler.

Sam: Arnold Schoenberg.

Sarah: Aaron Copland!

Shayna: Steve Reich.

Sam: Leonard Bernstein!

Sarah: George Gershwin....and Irving Berlin! Oh! And Stephen Sondheim!

Zack: How about film score writers, like Bernard Hermann and Jerry Goldsmith?

Shayna: They're not classical, but how about my mom's favorites, Leonard Cohen and Paul Simon?

Zack: My grandma'd have a fit if I didn't say Carly Simon and Bette Midler!

Sam: Or Neil Diamond and Barbara Streisand!

Shayna: Hey – don't forget Beck! And Adam Lambert and Adam Levine!

Sarah: Yeah – Maroon 5!

Zack: And Kiss!

All: *laughter*

C. Ruth: OK, OK! You get the picture, don't you? We've just mentioned about 25 names without a moment's hesitation! You'll also notice, we started with classical and then came through Broadway and film and popular songwriters... all the way up to rock bands!

C. Ruth: Let's bring things back to where we started, '**Tikkun Olam**'. This is VOENA, an **a cappella** children's group from the San Francisco Bay Area. They're singing a traditional Hebrew tune, '*Dodi li*' – a love song we often hear at weddings. The lyrics of the chorus mean: '*My beloved is mine and I am his, / The shepherd [grazing his flock] among the lilies.*' Sing along if you feel like it.

C. Ruth: Jewish music has expanded and taken on the rich colors of so many different cultures, it might be interesting to hear a modern, but very mystical piece, '*Aleph*', written by a St. Louisan, Rabbi James Stone Goodman. He's singing it with the Brothers Lazaroff, also from St. Louis.

C. Ruth: As you probably know, The Brothers Lazaroff have a modern-day approach to spiritual music. This is one of their more recent releases, '*May G-d be with You*'. Again, theirs is another unique voice of Jewish music.

Narrator: The students thoroughly enjoyed the piece, feeling the blessings contained in it.

C. Ruth: I have one more piece that really illustrates the influence of the world on Jewish music and vice-versa. Here is a jazz group called the Bustan Abraham Quartet – one of the leaders in world music. It's by bassist Emmanuel Mann and is called '*Solaris*'. This is a live recording from Jerusalem in 2013.

Narrator: Cantor Ruth gave her students a long, warm look.

C. Ruth: Class, I wish we had more time for this lesson. But now that we've opened just a few of the doors to Jewish music and its worldwide diversity, I invite you to continue exploring it as you take the next step into adulthood. One last time... What was that unifying directive again?

Students: '**Tikkun Olam**' – 'Repair of the World'!

C. Ruth: Excellent! Do you understand how music can be used as a tool of healing to bring many different people together?

All: Um-hmmms of agreement.

C. Ruth: I know you appreciate what a great gift it is to be able to celebrate our Jewish heritage and our music like this.

I leave you now with this marvelous and fun message from Cantor Azi Schwartz of the Park Avenue Synagogue. He sings this tune in honor of a Bat Mitzvah who loves the musical, *Hamilton*. He sings the lyrics of the hymn *Adon Olam* to the tune of 'You'll Be Back' by Lin-Manuel Miranda. **Shalom**, my friends, and **L'hitraot**... See you again soon.

Students: Thank you, Cantor Ruth. **Shalom. L'hitraot.**